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Instruments of creativity

By Sgt. Edward Eagerton

Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska— Creativity can be found in even the most regimented of environments. In the world of music, a musician must first learn the complexities of the language before being able to speak with fluid passion. Likewise, the same can be said of flying helicopters for the U.S. Air Force.

How is it that these two different concepts can be so similar? For Col. Timothy O'Brien, commander of the Alaska Air National Guard, they both possess a space that is open to interpretation, where the person sitting at the controls of his instrument can improvise within the boundaries of his craft.

"They're both very creative things and really are very similar," explained O'Brien. "With flying, we operate with rules, procedures, techniques and manuals. In the music business, we have notes, rhythm and key signatures. They tell you how to fly, but they don't tell you what to do with it, and it's the same thing with music. They tell you how to play it and what it should sound like, but they don't tell you how to interpret it."

When O'Brien was in the 4th grade, he began playing the clarinet, much to the chagrin of his parents, he said with a reminiscent smile on his face. His mother would often take to running the vacuum every time he sat down to practice.

"In hindsight, I wonder a little bit if that was a critique on my musical abilities," he added laughingly. "They never asked me to practice, but I liked to."

O'Brien continued to play the clarinet from grade school through his undergraduate studies in college. He then broadened his talents by learning to play the saxophone, flute, oboe and bassoon. It was during this time that he decided to explore a career the military.

"A friend of mine who I knew from college was a part of the 561st Air Force Band from the California Air National Guard," said O'Brien. "She invited me to come play a rehearsal. At first, I thought, 'join the military? No way!' but then I gave it another look. This turned out to be the best decision of my life."

By being a part of the Air National Guard, O'Brien was able to pay for his college and travel around the country doing something important, he explained. As a result of his experiences playing with the band at airshows, O'Brien became interested in flying.

The day after his graduate recital, O'Brien left for officer training with the U.S. Air Force. His path would take him into aviation, where over the course of his career he would fly HH-3E Jolly Green Giant and HH-60 Pave Hawk helicopters used by the U.S. Air Force's elite rescue squadrons. It was during this transition that O'Brien left behind his musical aspirations to pursue his new career.

"Essentially, I stopped playing for about 20 years," he said. "Flying rescue helicopters was exciting, but I missed it. I missed being a part of the music community."

After 20 years of not playing, it was on Valentine's Day in 2009 that his wife surprised him with a present.

"I guess I had been whining too much," said O'Brien, "and my spouse invited me home for lunch that day. She had a present and I asked what it was; she had bought me a bassoon. It was one of those kind of 'hey honey, we talked about making big purchases, right?' and she said, 'Well, I could send it back,' and I said 'No!'"

At that point, O'Brien found a bassoon teacher in Anchorage and began practicing again.

"My wife didn't even run the vacuum," he laughed. "So my teacher helped me get back into the swing of things; he helped me build my chops back up. I really enjoyed being back on that creative side."

Once again in the musician's seat, O'Brien began playing concerts. His first in 20 years was with the Anchorage Concert Choir, where he played in the orchestra for a Christmas program.

O'Brien later moved to Maxwell-Gunter Air Force Base in Montgomery, Ala. where he commanded the U.S. Air Force Officer Training School located there. When he learned that the Montgomery Symphony was holding auditions, he decided to give it a shot.

"They were having auditions, and I figured, 'why not?'" he said. "I auditioned and the guys there told me they could find me a home, and so I played with the Montgomery Symphony. I also played with the Montgomery Concert Band while I was down there."

Back in the rhythm of things, O'Brien continued to play concerts and devote himself to his love of music. To him, this was also a great opportunity to reach out to the community around him and transcend the barriers and perceptions that people have with living on two sides of the fence, as he described it.

"We're kind of insulated from the public, we really are," he explained. "It was a great way to reach out and meet a lot of people who didn't know much about the military, and every time, it was like, 'wow, you're pretty much a regular person, even though you do this other thing.'"

O'Brien's musical endeavors would follow the movement of his military career. When he left Alabama for Eielson Air Force Base, he joined the Fairbanks Symphony. Afterwards, when he moved to Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson in Anchorage, he found gigs in the area, including a recent run with the Anchorage Opera at Grant Hall at Alaska Pacific University.

"I got together with my old music teacher down here, and he asked if I would be interested in playing with the Anchorage Opera," said O'Brien. "It's been a blast playing with them."

For O'Brien, playing music is a very personal experience and serves to connect him to what he feels is a larger purpose, much like his service to his community in the Alaska Air National Guard.

"I really think people have this hunger, this need if you will, to express themselves creatively," he said. "They want to be a part of something creative. They want to create something that's larger than life, and when you're part of a group of people who are contributing to this musical idea or this production and you produce something that gels, it becomes larger than life."

Photo Cutline:

Col O'Brien

Col. Timothy O'Brien, commander of the Alaska Air National Guard, poses with his bassoon.

Photo courtesy of Col. Timothy O'Brien